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Statewide indoor, school mask mandate set to end March 21

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The end to statewide mandates on masking indoors and at schools is in sight as Gov. Jay Inslee set the removal of the requirement for March 21. During a Feb. 17 press conference, Inslee announced the end to mandates in a large number of settings. The action specifically affects schools and child care facilities, restaurants and bars, churches and places of worship, indoor athletic facilities including gyms and recreation centers, grocery stores, businesses and retail establishments. Masks will still be required in health care facilities like hospitals and dentist offices, long-term care facilities, correctional facilities,

and on public transit, which includes taxis, rideshare services and school buses. Private businesses and local governments who want to continue requiring masks will be allowed to do so. Inslee also announced the state will drop its vaccination requirement for large events beginning March 1. "This is good news for us to have relief in sight," Inslee said. The governor said March 21 was selected based on modeling which showed the current rate of hospitalizations will be at an acceptable level at that time at less than five per 100,000 of population in the prior seven days. The governor noted those



Gov. Jay Inslee

who want to continue wearing masks won't have to stop. "That will be part of our order, to protect you and your ability (to wear a mask) should you desire to do so," Inslee said. That protection includes students in schools. "We know that we have some good news here, but we know we have a journey still ahead of us to get these hospitalization numbers down so that people can go into hospitals and get treated when they need it, for heart attacks and car accidents and everything else," Inslee said. The governor acknowledged the date set for the mandate's removal has received feedback

from Washingtonians on both sides of the fence. Some have said the timeline is too far out, while others believe it's too soon. "I know that there are some people who feel that it should've been ended earlier. I also know there's a lot of people who think it maybe is ending too soon," Inslee said. For the former group, Inslee pointed to the 1,000 COVID-19 deaths in the state in January, while for the latter he said he is confident the number of cases will not overload hospitals. Inslee said Washington's state of emergency will not be lifted at the same time the mask mandate ends. He pointed to a number of reasons, which included access

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Suspect who led to off-duty officer's shooting faces murder charges

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The suspect in a police pursuit that led to the death of a Vancouver Police officer who was a Battle Ground resident now faces charges of first-degree murder, according to court documents. Julio Cesar Segura, 20, faces 10 charges, including three new charges of first-degree murder, one of second-degree murder and one of attempted first-degree kidnapping. These are in addition to charges of first-degree robbery and burglary, possession of a stolen vehicle and attempt to elude. Previous charges of first-degree attempted murder and third-degree assault appear to be upgraded, based on court documents. Although originally scheduled for Feb. 16, Segura received an extension on his arraignment to March 1. Segura's charges are in connection to the death of Donald Sahota, whose home Segura allegedly trespassed into after he fled from law enforcement following a robbery at a Brush Prairie Chevron gas station on Jan. 29. According to court documents, the prosecution argues Segura received the murder charges because his actions while fleeing from the burglary caused Sahota's death. The charging documents note Sahota was an officer performing his duties. Segura faces additional charges because he was armed with a

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The Oak Tree rises again

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A Woodland staple is set to return this spring. On Feb. 17, painters sized up the outside of the Oak Tree building just off Interstate 5, as they looked to see what spots needed another layer of color. The building has been more or less vacant since April of 2019 when management at that time shut its doors after financial woes. Now, signs of life are returning to the property. The sign of the business still hails the closed spot as a place to gamble. Muriel Stanton, who along with her partner Jennifer Johnson, run the new iteration of the Woodland establishment, said the current project will return to the site's pre-gambling roots. When it opens, there won't be card tables or other gambling in the building. Stanton said the goal for the business is to establish the Oak Tree's focus on entertainment for all. "We wanted to go back to the roots of this," Stanton said. "This was a family restaurant and it was known for everything being made from scratch." The new business hosted a hiring event on Feb. 20 at Stanton and Johnson's Adeline Farms, an event center near Woodland. Stanton said that prior to the hiring event, they had already selected an executive chef, Nate Dahrens, who will help build the restaurant's "everything from scratch" mantra.



PHOTO BY RICK BANNAN

Workers analyze the exterior of the Oak Tree Restaurant in Woodland on Feb. 17.

"We will even culture our own sour cream," Stanton said. "Pasta made in-house. We're bringing the bakery back." She said a section of the menu will be called "memory lane" with the most-requested dishes from the Oak Tree's prior existence. She said the large cinnamon roll, beet salad and a "bankrupt stew," which will now be dubbed the prosperity stew, will return. Stanton said certain days will feature a prime rib night and Sunday brunch will be a staple. The sign looming over the building will see minor adjust-

ments to get rid of the site's gambling past. The sign, which was grandfathered in after a state law on interstate signage, will feature more energy-efficient LED lighting when the changes are made. Stanton said the Oak Tree consists of several business buildings that are in close proximity, which proved to be a challenge when undertaking the restoration work. She recounted how the current building owner Jose Guitron came into ownership of the building after he was approached by community members who wanted to see the

establishment return to its former glory. By September the purchase was finalized, and in October a Facebook group for the business became active, as it teased the restaurant's reopening. Guitron, who runs La Casa Tapatia near the Oak Tree, said he felt owning the building is a way to give back to a community that made it possible for him to grow his own business pursuits. Guitron first encountered Stanton and Johnson while catering for

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Mask

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to federal funding and maintaining protections for workers who want to wear masks, among others.

As he pointed to the many other phases of reopening the state has undertaken, Inslee said what he announced Feb. 17 is "removing one of the last vestiges of things that are inhibiting for people."

"Our businesses are not closed. Our gyms are open. Our restaurants are open. Our schools are open," Inslee said.

Though COVID-19 hospitalizations are on the decline, Inslee said the state

rate of cases currently remains "extremely high."

"No doubt the health care system is still stressed in many ways and it's going to continue to be so," said Washington State Secretary of Health Umair Shah.

Shah said the current protocols add an additional burden to the health care system when patients who are admitted to the hospital for reasons other than COVID-19 test positive.

"Any time you throw in COVID as part of the mix, it now adds a burden of care and infection control to the practitioner," Shah said. "That is something we're hearing every day from our hospital partners."

Shah urged Washingtonians to "re-

spect the rules of the road" if local health jurisdictions or businesses decide to still require masking after the statewide mandate goes away. He also encouraged others to respect individuals who choose to wear masks. He said masks are still recommended from a public health standpoint, even when the mandate goes away.

Both Shah and Inslee pointed to COVID-19 vaccinations as an integral part to help stop a resurgence in the disease. Inslee said unvaccinated individuals are 16 times more likely to be hospitalized if they get COVID-19 than those who are vaccinated.

Shah noted more than 72% of the eligible population in Washington is fully vaccinated.

"It is not that percentage in every part of our state, in every community, in every neighborhood, and that is the challenge," Shah said. "If we could get that percentage (of vaccinations) all the way through we would be in a markedly different place."

Inslee acknowledged the threat of COVID-19 will not be eliminated on March 21, but he feels mechanisms like vaccinations will help keep the disease's impact low. Shah added the removal of the mandate is based on sound reasoning.

"We don't know how long COVID is going to be around, but we want to go on with our activities and enjoy those activities — but that we do so safely," Shah said.

Charges

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knife. Segura allegedly stabbed Sahota multiple times during the altercation at Sahota's home.

On the same day Segura was supposed to be sentenced, the Lower Columbia Major Crimes Team released more information from its investigation into Sahota's death. The new information came from drone and aircraft surveillance, radio traffic, emergency recordings and interviews.

The major crimes team report stated that after the alleged armed robbery at the Chevron at the intersection of Northeast 99th Street and state Route 503, Segura fled in a vehicle with dealer tags, which previous reports stated were stolen in Yakima.

Segura's vehicle was found on Interstate 205 and responding law enforcement pursued him, the report stated. Officers deployed spike strips and Segura fled on foot around Northeast 219th Street in Battle Ground. A SWAT team and a negotiator responded to the area. Responding officers received a description on the subject, who was said to be wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a black undershirt, a hat, a mask, glasses and had shaggy hair.

A drone saw Segura walking

on a private road and captured him walking into a driveway identified as Sahota's residence, the report stated, in the 7800 block of Northeast 239th Street. An emergency caller who was at the residence reported her husband, later identified as Sahota, was in contact with Segura. The caller, who was previously identified as Sahota's wife, also reported hearing sirens in the area, later reporting Segura had assaulted Sahota.

Air surveillance provided information to officers on the ground, the report stated, informing them that Sahota and Segura were fighting. Neither drone nor aircraft surveillance could identify which subject was Sahota or Segura as they fought on the driveway of the residence. One of the aircraft units noted they believed they saw a gun fall from one of the two subjects during the fight, stated the report.

As a ground team arrived, video showed one of the two involved in the fight, later identified as Segura, got up and ran into the residence, the report stated. Clark County Sheriff's Deputy Jonathan Feller was the first to arrive on the scene while Sahota got up and grabbed what was believed

to be the gun and ran to the front door of the residence.

Sahota was wearing a dark shirt over a white shirt, based on the report, which was the opposite of what Segura was described to be wearing in initial reports. Both were reported to have a "tan" complexion and were wearing blue jeans.

Video surveillance showed the second subject, identified as Sahota, had attempted to kick in the door, which had been closed. It showed Feller fire his rifle, after which Sahota slid down to the ground. Seconds later, a woman exited the garage door, which had been opened, and Segura exited the front door with his hands up. Officers were seen helping Sahota, according to the report.

Witnesses told investigators they thought Sahota was the suspect "based on actions and appearance," the report stated, including radio transmissions from a sheriff's deputy who said the "suspect" had been shot. Another deputy said they believed Segura was the homeowner after he exited the residence and ordered him back into the home for safety concerns.

In an interview, Feller said he saw "a shadow of a person enter-

ing the residence," according to the report. Feller said he saw "a male who matched the updated armed robbery suspect description" who had picked up a gun from the driveway and ran to the front door. He said he thought it was the armed robbery suspect forcing entry into the residence, "and feared that the suspect was trying to enter the home to kill the residents," according to the report.

Feller ordered Sahota on the ground, but didn't see any response from Sahota, he said during the investigation.

Feller "told investigators he fired to stop the threat to the residents," according to the report. He said he didn't realize he had shot Sahota until he saw Segura leave the house.

An examination from the Clark County Medical Examiner's Office showed Sahota suf-

fered "two serious stab wounds" to his abdomen and near his chest and neck. The latter stab went into his lung cavity and was considered life-threatening.

Sahota was also shot with three rifle rounds, two of which entered his shoulder and went through his chest and one into his right wrist. Of four rounds fired, the medical examiner stated, one missed Sahota and hit his house's front door.

Investigators found Sahota had fired one round from a pistol during the incident, the report stated. The report does not specify if it was the fourth round recorded.

A video summary of the investigation has been turned over to the Clark County Prosecuting Attorney's office, the report stated. Lab results and scene reconstruction still need to be completed. The investigation is ongoing.



Donald Sahota



PHOTO BY RICK BANNAN

Muriel Stanton, one of two new business owners of the Oak Tree Restaurant in Woodland, talks about the titular tree at the property on Feb. 17.



PHOTO BY RICK BANNAN

New Image Painting and Construction's Dan Green paints the side of the Oak Tree Restaurant on Feb. 17.

Oak Tree

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Adeline Farms' events, where he said he was able to get an idea of their integrity as businesspeople.

"When he made the decision that he was going to go for it, he called me, and he said 'will you open it for me?'" Stanton said. "When (Guitron) asked us, it was just a knee-jerk reaction, absolutely yes."

"He gave it to me and (Johnson) and I guess he just saw that we knew what to do to restore another piece of property and make it a successful business," Stanton said.

Adeline Farms has its own heritage to Woodland, which the women were drawn to when they purchased that property.

Stanton said Johnson is a big history buff. Johnson followed local social media posts to pinpoint the Oak Tree's importance. The building gets its name from a 300-year-old tree on the property, which as part of the project, Stanton said is being taken care of.

"We are just absolutely passionate and drawn to taking care of this. It needed it and I'm so glad we get to be the stewards of it," Stanton.

Rehabilitating the 24,000-square-foot building has been a challenging task.

"We can't get away with just trying to open its doors," Stanton said.

As of Feb. 17, the building was still under a heavy remodel.

Given the ultimately failed starts from previous business entities, Stanton said the support she and Johnson have received from the community has made the daunting task of resurrecting an old town institution somewhat less of an ordeal.

"People have been so absolutely, mind-blowingly positive," Stanton said. "We could have a lot of criticism ... 'another try,' but people have been so incredibly supportive and positive, and their belief in us, is just, seriously, with how hard this project is, it is what motivates us."

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